# Reflections of Cleopatra VII through Time: Cultural Perceptions of Gender and Power

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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May 2010

Abstract

The story of Cleopatra VII's life has been a source for countless authors, playwrights, filmmakers, and historians since before her death in 30 BCE. Her purported decadence, wealth, power, and beauty have captivated our minds, and her myth has only grown with the years. I propose that a study of her many representations, both in ancient sources and more modern ones, will reveal information not only about the queen, but about the cultures and individual perspectives of those who have portrayed her in various media. By examining Roman sources, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, films, works of art, and more recent writings on Cleopatra VII, we can gain a better understanding of how gender and power are perceived in different times and cultures.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank my mother, who instilled in me a passion for reading early on and has supported me through all of my endeavors, as well as my father, whose many stories about his time in Egypt inspired my love of both history and storytelling.

I'd like to thank all of my professors in the history and anthropology departments; it has truly been an honor to work with such talented and inspiring people. I'd especially like to thank Gerald Waite for his enthusiastic interest in my studies, as well as Dr. Abel Alves for his continuous support and encouragement for my work on Cleopatra.

I would also like to thank the faculty and staff of the Athens Centre for helping me make the most of my time in Greece: Michael, Yanna, Ekavi, Eleni, Nina, Vassia, Katja, and Rosemary—you have touched so many students' lives, including my own, in ways you may never know.

Finally, I would like to thank Dr. James S. Ruebel for all of his help and encouragement. Without his expertise and criticism, as well as the use of his library, this paper would never have reached its present form.

Cleopatra captivates our minds in a way that no other ancient figure can: simply speaking her name will conjure up various images in the minds of those who hear it, from femme fatale to ruthless monarch, ambitious whore to intelligent queen. Her story is so embedded in legend and tradition that it is nearly impossible to extricate the woman from the myth. By examining how her story has been written, rewritten, embellished and misrepresented during the past two millennia, we can perhaps learn something about not only the woman behind the myth, but about ourselves as well; for the many faces of Cleopatra reflect facets of not only the queen's larger-than-life story, but our own cultural conceptions of women, power, sex, and love.

Even before her death, Cleopatra was largely defined in the West through her relationships with powerful men, most notably Julius Caesar, Marc Antony, and Octavian. Just as Egypt is often juxtaposed as an effeminate, decadent, and weak culture next to the masculine and vigorous Rome, Cleopatra's image in Western culture is often shaped by perceptions of her relationship with Rome and Roman leaders.

In histories, plays, literature and film, she serves as a symbol of the corrupt yet fascinating East, which becomes a trap for the great and honorable men of Rome. This theme has been expounded upon time and time again throughout history, with Cleopatra cast in the role of the ultimate femme fatale. Her story has grown with the years, but her prominence in the political world of the Mediterranean in the first century BCE ensures that historians can agree on several facts about her life. Before delving into the concepts of gender and cultural expectations which shape the many portrayals of the queen, it is first helpful to recapitulate the highest points of her story.

Cleopatra VII Philopator was born in about 69 B.C., the daughter of Ptolemy XII Auletes, ruler of Egypt. The Ptolemies had ruled Egypt since the death of Alexander the Great, but

Auletes had fallen on hard times; he was deeply in debt to Rome and relied on bribes to keep the Romans from annexing Egypt altogether. Driven out of his country by the volatile Alexandrians, Ptolemy XII fled to Rome in 57 BCE; during this time, his daughter Berenice IV took the throne.[1] Eventually, a Roman army led by Gabinius, a political associate of Pompey the Great, marched on Alexandria to restore Auletes as ruler of Egypt; Berenice was executed, leaving her younger sister Cleopatra VII next in line for the throne. When Auletes died in 51 BCE, the eighteen-year-old Cleopatra and her younger brother, Ptolemy XIII, became co-rulers of Egypt.

Cleopatra's younger siblings, however, were not content to let the eldest rule; in 48 BCE Cleopatra fled Egypt as a result of the scheming of Ptolemy XIII and their sister, Arsinoë. Cleopatra immediately began to raise an army in Syria in an attempt to take back the throne. At the same time, however, Rome was having problems of its own; after being defeated by Julius Caesar at Pharsalus, Pompey fled to Egypt, expecting a warm welcome due to his past relations with both Cleopatra and her father. Instead, Ptolemy XIII's advisors had him beheaded. When Caesar showed up a few days later in pursuit of the defeated Pompey, he was presented with Pompey's head. Ptolemy and his advisors had hoped to gain Caesar's favor with such an offering; instead, the general was furious over the fate of his former friend[2] and set himself up in the Alexandrian palace, announcing his intention to reconcile Ptolemy with his sister.

Cleopatra soon managed to slip back into Alexandria and meet with Caesar without her brother's knowledge. Caesar and Cleopatra became lovers, and the furious Ptolemy XIII was now "more hostage than king."[3] Ptolemy XIII continued to plot against his sister and the

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[1] Edith Flamarion, *Cleopatra: The Life and Death of a Pharaoh*, trans. Alexandra Bonfante-Warren (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997), 27.

[2]Pompey and Caesar had been political allies for many years, and Pompey had even married Caesar's daughter Julia, a strong bond for Romans; see, for example, Catullus 73.3-4

[3] Flamarion, 44.

Romans, however, and in October his general, Achillas, marched on Alexandria with his Egyptian army. The Alexandrian War took place in the streets of the city, an unaccustomed battleground for Caesar's Roman legions. On March 27, 47 BCE, Ptolemy XIII was killed in battle. Cleopatra regained her throne, and out of tradition married her ten-year-old brother, Ptolemy XIV. Caesar remained in Egypt for some time, touring the country with Cleopatra. He finally left in May, and in June Cleopatra gave birth to a son, Ptolemy Caesar, who was nicknamed Caesarion or "little Caesar" by the Alexandrian people. Sometime in 46 BCE, Cleopatra and her son traveled to Rome, where they lived in one of Caesar's villas for some time.[4] In 44 BCE, Caesar was murdered in the Senate. Cleopatra returned to Egypt, and remained aloof from, though probably attentive to, Rome's affairs for a time. In 43 BCE, Antony, Octavian, and Lepidus formed the (Second) Triumvirate and began to rout the remaining murderers of Caesar.

In 41 BCE, Cleopatra met Antony at Tarsus; though there is a chance they may have met before when Antony was in Egypt with Gabinius in 55 BCE, this is their first documented meeting. Because Antony's sphere of influence within the Triumvirate engulfed the Eastern Mediterranean, it seems only natural that Cleopatra would seek to make him an ally. The two became lovers, and Antony followed her back to Egypt. Antony left Egypt for Rome in 40 BCE, and Cleopatra gave birth to twins, Cleopatra Selene and Alexander Helios. After abandoning his new wife Octavia (whom he had married in an attempt to repair relations between himself and Octavian) and returning to Cleopatra and the East in 37 BCE, Antony began a campaign against the Parthians, and Cleopatra gave birth to another child, Ptolemy Philadelphus. Though Antony

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[4] Recently, some scholars have begun to question whether Cleopatra did not travel between Egypt and Rome during this time. Marilyn Skinner, in her paper "Clodia and Cleopatra" that was presented at the Classical Association of the Middle West and South in 2010, has argued that on her second visit to Rome Cleopatra was in fact the guest of Clodia, rather than Caesar.

met defeat against the Parthians, Cleopatra began to engage in "intense diplomatic activity with neighboring states."[5] Antony had gifted much of Syria as well as Cyprus back to Egypt, and the expansion of Egypt's power as well as the political policies of Cleopatra must have worried Octavian, who was also consolidating power in the West. Antony became more and more attached to the queen, and finally in 32 BCE the Romans declared war against Cleopatra. Antony and Cleopatra's forces met those of Octavian in Greece; they were defeated at the sea battle of Actium in 31 BCE. Cleopatra and Antony returned to Alexandria; Octavian followed them, and the armies met again in 30 BCE. Antony fell on his own sword, perhaps after hearing falsely that Cleopatra had died; Octavian took Alexandria, and Cleopatra committed suicide rather than be taken to Rome in chains.

These are the basic facts that historians have gleaned from various sources over time. It is obvious from a glance that Cleopatra's story and fate were intertwined with that of Rome, whose own fate was unclear as it made the bloody transition from Republic to Empire; nonetheless, it can be questioned as to whether the queen ought to be solely defined by her relationship and interactions with Rome. It may be more historically productive to view Cleopatra within her own milieu, as queen of Egypt and an influential and powerful woman.[6] Then again, the myths and perceptions that surround Cleopatra can be powerful in their own right, for they provide a window through which we can better understand gender, culture, and politics. An examination of how Cleopatra has been portrayed, in various media and in different times, will reveal how gender relations interact with the wider world of politics and culture.

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[5] Flamarion, 70.

[6] There have been several recent attempts to address this; see, for example, Sally-Ann Ashton, *Cleopatra and Egypt* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008).

*Cleopatra and the Romans*

Numerous Romans included descriptions and mentions of Cleopatra in their writings. Their perceptions of the queen and her relationships with Roman leaders reveal much about the roles and views of women in the Roman world, as well as the degree to which Cleopatra did not fit that ideal. Many of the Roman writers undoubtedly exaggerated the decadence and corruption of the queen in an attempt to vilify the enemy of Octavian, later known as Caesar Augustus and the first Roman Emperor; in this case, it is not so much the fact that Cleopatra was a woman, but that she was the adversary of Octavian and Rome, that resulted in such harsh language. Nonetheless, Cleopatra's person was a difficult one for Romans to accept, for she defied everything that an ideal Roman woman ought to exhibit.

From her first liaison with Julius Caesar, Cleopatra was painted as corrupt and immoral by those in Rome. Cicero in particular hated her; in a letter to Atticus in 44 BCE, he declared, "I detest the queen… I cannot recall the arrogance of the queen, when she lived on an estate across the Tiber, without great anguish."[7] Cicero, like many Romans, abhorred the concept of monarchy and agitated during this period of anarchy for a return to the true Republican values of earlier days. Cleopatra, for Cicero and many others, was a symbol of the corruption that came hand-in-hand with monarchical or dictatorial rule; setting herself up in Caesar's villa, she seemed to signal an end to the days of Republican government. Indeed, Cleopatra had traveled to Rome at a time when the Senate's power was severely weakened. Men such as Pompey the Great and Julius Caesar had been able to rise to power and threaten Rome itself; Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon had been perhaps the most severe example of this to the Roman people. Caesar was already dictator, and it seemed a small step, perhaps, from dictatorship to hereditary monarchy. The fact that Caesar had taken a queen for a consort surely worried the proponents of the

[7] Cicero *To Atticus* 15.15.2.

Republic; her presence in Rome, as well as the presence of her son Ptolemy Caesar, would have raised many questions in regard to Caesar's plans for the future of both Rome and Egypt.[8]

In Egypt, Cleopatra had tried to present herself in ways that emphasized her role as the reincarnation of Isis, a divine queen and fertile mother. Her use of such symbols was nothing new in Egypt; according to Joyce Tyldesley,

> the Ptolemies believed themselves to be a valid Egyptian dynasty, and devoted a great deal of time and money to demonstrating that they were the theological continuation of all the dynasties that had gone before. Cleopatra defined herself as an Egyptian queen, and drew on the iconography and cultural references of earlier queens to reinforce her position.[9]

Indeed, Cleopatra had several role models to choose from amongst the Ptolemaic rulers and the Egyptian pharaohs. Tiye, the mother of Akhenaten, and Nefertiti, Akhenaten's wife, were powerful women of the Eighteenth Dynasty, both of whom developed their own iconography which distinguished them as not only the primary wife in their respective households, but as a divinity. Both women were depicted in their statuary with the double uraeus crown, as was Arsinoë II of the Ptolemies; this crown has been linked to the title "Mistress of the Two Lands," or Upper and Lower Egypt.[10] In fact, it was not unheard of for Egypt to be ruled solely by a female pharaoh; Hatshepsut, often depicted wearing the traditional kilt and false beard of the pharaoh, is perhaps the most famous case, but there are other examples of both female rulers and powerful wives prior to the Ptolemies. Ptolemaic women were even more exertive in their roles and positions as powerful royalty; because the Ptolemies did not practice polygamy as previous pharaohs had done, their women were perhaps better able to concentrate power and establish

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[8] For a work on Caesar's possible monarchical intentions, see, for example, Stefan Weinstock, *Divius Julius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

[9] Joyce Tyldesley, *Cleopatra: Last Queen of Egypt* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 3.

[10] Ashton, 66.

themselves as independent entities, rather than simply a primary wife or mother in the royal household. For example, Ptolemaic women such as Cleopatra III "adopted a more masculine image" in sculpture in order to emphasize their power.[11] Clearly, Cleopatra could look back on a long and rich precedent of powerful women within her own family.

Royal women throughout Egyptian history were also associated with the divine, most notably fertility goddesses such as Hathor and, later, Isis. At the same time, before the Ptolemaic Dynasty few women were considered to be living goddesses on earth. Cleopatra II, after revolting against her brother and declaring herself queen of Upper Egypt, became "Queen Cleopatra, Philometor (mother-loving) goddess, Soteira (savior)."[12] Cleopatra III was even more closely identified with the divine, portraying herself as a reincarnation of the goddess Isis; she even adopted religious roles that included "priest of the cult of Alexander," a typically male role.[13]

Cleopatra made good use of her own connection to the divine, even going so far as to mint coins depicting her nursing an infant Caesarion—a seemingly direct reference to the mother Isis, who was usually depicted nursing an infant Horus.[14] She adopted the title "Thea," or goddess, from the beginning of her rule, as well as that of "Philopator," or father-loving. Eventually, Cleopatra VII took on the full title "Thea Neotera Philopator kai Philopatris," or "the new goddess who loves her father and her country."[15] Being a ruler of Egypt, it was an accepted

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[11] Ashton, 129.

[12] Ashton, 128.

[13] Ashton, 129.

[14] Susan Walker and Peter Higgs, ed. *Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 178.

[15] Ashton, 132.

fact that Cleopatra was a female Horus; as such, her divinity was never in question with the Egyptian people.[16] Cleopatra also chose to emphasize her role as the New Isis, however, as can be identified through her statuary and inscriptions, as well as the aforementioned coin; in this, she was following in the footsteps of her father, who had fashioned himself to be the "Neos Dionysos."[17] By associating herself with Isis and taking on the title "Philopator kai Philopatris," Cleopatra placed herself in a special position: she was the mother and daughter of Egypt, a product of a long line of Egyptian rulers and a protector of the Egyptian people.

Another attestation to her religious and political roles lies in the fact that Cleopatra VII was the only ruler in a long line of Ptolemies who actually learned the native Egyptian language—perhaps better to take on her role as the leader of Egyptian religious cults. She was active in her many roles as priestess and queen, participating in such age-old ceremonies as the bestowing of the new Buchis bull, among others. It is easy for us today to look with a skeptical eye on the religious ceremonies and beliefs of Cleopatra and her subjects; however, as Guy Weill Goudchaux reminds us, in 59 BCE a Roman man was killed by an angry Alexandrian mob after he had accidentally killed a cat, an animal sacred to the Egyptians.[18] The Egyptian religion was alive and well during Cleopatra's reign, and she was its primary priestess.

In Rome, Cleopatra's image was quite different; she was not the divine mother and daughter of Egypt, but a product of a long line of debauched and often illegitimate kings who had left the country deeply in debt and in a position of near-subservience to Rome. After enumerating the sins of her fathers in his *Geography*, Strabo writes in the first century CE that

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[16] Ashton, 131.

[17] Guy Weill Goudchaux, "Cleopatra's Subtle Religious Strategy," in *Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth*, ed. Susan Walker and Peter Higgs (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 129.

[18] Cited in Goudchaux, "Cleopatra's Subtle Religious Strategy," in *Cleopatra of Egypt*, ed. Susan Walker and Peter Higgs, 128.

"Antony crossed into Asia and bestowed upon Cleopatra the honor of choosing her as his wife and having children with her. He fought alongside her in the Battle of Actium and fled with her too. Then, Augustus Caesar, after pursuing them, brought about both their deaths and ended the drunken abuse of Egypt."[19] In his *Roman History*, Cassius Dio, writing in 202 CE, sums up her reign this way: after Ptolemy XIII's death, "the Egyptians first were enslaved to Cleopatra, which they did not want, and then were declared subject to Rome."[20] Perceptions of Cleopatra in Rome were based on Roman conceptions of both the nature of the Egyptians and the Ptolemies as well as that of women and gender roles, and these differed greatly from how the queen was perceived in Egypt.

Most of the Roman sources available to us today were written in the two or three centuries following Cleopatra's death. By this time, the days of the Republic were over, for it had been transformed into an Empire. Many historians and writers were "keen to praise the father" and founder of this new empire, Caesar Augustus.[21] Augustan poetry is a particularly strong example of this. Maria Wyke gives a detailed analysis of Cleopatra and the role of the mistress in Augustan literature: she argues that the "Cleopatra of Augustan poetry is denied a role as the fatherland's loving daughter, so she does not appear as good wife, or as fertile mother."[22] This is contrary to Cleopatra's image in Egypt, where she is portrayed as both the daughter of her illustrious forefathers and the protecting mother of Egypt through her connection to the fertility mother-goddess Isis. Caesar, too, played up the idea of Cleopatra the mother-goddess: when he placed her statue inside the temple of Venus in Rome, he was making an

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[19] Strabo *Geography* 17.1.11.

[20] Cassius Dio *Roman History* 42.3.

[21] Ashton, 18.

[22] Maria Wyke, *The Roman Mistress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 206.

obvious connection between Venus, the goddess of love and mother of his own ancestors, Isis, the goddess of motherhood and fertility, and the mother of his son, Cleopatra.

The majority of Romans rejected this portrayal of Cleopatra, however; as an enemy of Octavian and Rome, she was most often portrayed in Augustan poetry as "a nameless, scarcely individuated *meretrix regina*, a dangerous anomaly who represents the 'otherness' of the East and whose characteristics thereby lend poetic authority to the supremacy of the West."[23] The poets also made use of her connections to Isis in symbolic ways, twisting the goddess away from images of fertility and motherhood and focusing on her foreignness. In the *Aeneid*, for example, the queen goes to war accompanied by "barking Anubis and the rattling sistrum," which suggest the "disorder, dissonance, and barbarous animality" of the Egyptian people and their queen.[24] The shield of Aeneas, from which this description is taken, depicts the new unity of the Roman people following this age of uncertainty and incoherence of the world, which is most aptly symbolized by Cleopatra and the Egyptian gods.[25]

The idea of the Egyptian *other* was not created merely for the purpose of vilifying Cleopatra, however; there had long existed in both Greek and, later, Roman society, the concept that Egypt was a wild land full of "violent, arrogant, gluttonous, and treacherous barbarians… crocodiles, beer-drinkers, and papyrus-eaters."[26] The Egyptian gods, many of whom are depicted with animal or half-human forms, were seen as violent, uncivilized and primitive next to the Greek and Roman pantheons. The strangeness of Egyptian culture made an excellent foil for Romans seeking to identify themselves; they were not Egyptian, not corrupt and decadent,

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[23] Wyke, 215.

[24] Wyke, 208.

[25] Virgil *Aeneid* 8.696-700.

[26] Wyke, 210.

not animal-worshippers, not pitiful subjects to an absolute monarch. They were Romans, honest and moral, worshippers of Jupiter, living in a free, republican society. Indeed, Cicero made good use of this concept, particularly in his attacks on his enemies, Catiline, Clodius, and Antony: for example, in an examination of Cicero's attack on Clodius, Clark and Ruebel noted that "Clodius, as *belua*, does not fit into the civilized (court) system of Rome, and the two bestial images (*fugiens in scalarum tenebras*; *in saepta inrupisset*) stress his wildness and animal-like behavior in sharp contrast to civilized men."[27] Cleopatra was thus painted as the other, a foreign and beastly creature, anathema to Roman ways because of her very nature.

Lucan, writing in 65 A.D., made use of two concepts common to Roman portrayals of Cleopatra, both the barbarous Egyptian and the unchaste, immoral woman, by calling up images of the sistrum, used in Egyptian rituals, and the story of Helen of Troy:

> Cleopatra the dishonor of Egypt,
> the savage Fury of Latium, the unchaste downfall of Rome.
> As much as
> that Spartan woman routed Argos and Troy with her baneful beauty,
> to the same degree, Cleopatra contributed to the furor in Italy.
> She terrified the Capitoline (how can that be?) with her sistrum…
> and the outcome was in doubt on the Leucadian swells,
> whether a woman, and a non-Roman at that, would rule the world.[28]

Again and again, the Roman writers reference Cleopatra as the unchaste woman and barbarous Egyptian who stepped out of her place, threatened Rome, and was rightfully cast down.

As noted before, the queen was not only depicted by Romans as a savage Egyptian, but also as an immoral woman. Octavian held his wife and sister up to the public's eye as examples of the ideal Roman woman; he even erected statues of these virtuous women, something that was

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[27] Mark Edward Clark and James S. Ruebel, "Philosophy and Rhetoric in Cicero's Pro Milone," *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 128 (1985): 63.

[28] Lucan *On the Civil War* 10.58-68.

"connected in the past almost exclusively with male service to the state."[29] This must have been an obvious attempt on his part to juxtapose two women, Antony's legal and upright wife in Rome, Octavia, with his perverse mistress, Cleopatra. Plutarch also makes reference to Octavia's role in the politics of the time:

> Octavian was very fond of his sister, who, it is said, was a marvel of a woman… Everyone supported this marriage to Octavia, in hopes that she, since she had dignity and intelligence in addition to considerable beauty, might support and be loved by Antony, as was fitting for such a woman, and that she would represent the salvation and harmony of all their affairs.[30]

It was not because Cleopatra was a woman, or even an Egyptian woman, that the Romans vilified her so completely; after all, Octavia, a woman herself, was held up as a savior of Rome, a woman who would go forth and mend the wounded relations between Rome's leaders.

Why, then, was Cleopatra so fiercely hated by the Romans? Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Cleopatra for most Romans was her seemingly unchaste behavior. It was not uncommon for Roman women to engage in extramarital affairs, yet Cleopatra's relationships with Caesar and Antony struck a discordant note with most Roman politicians. Holt N. Parker claims that "feminine virtue was… a sign of moral health of the commonwealth," as can be seen in his examination of the role of the Vestal Virgins in Roman society.[31] The Vestals, it has been argued, embodied the pure Roman state and its citizens, and a Vestal's "unpenetrated body was a metaphor for the unpenetrated walls of Rome."[32] This role of the Vestal Virgin within Rome can be further extended to the women of Rome within their families, and indeed most Mediterranean

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[29] Wyke, 218.

[30] Plutarch *Antony* 31.

[31] Holt N.Parker, "Why Were the Vestals Virgins? Or the Chastity of Women and the Safety of the Roman State.," *American Journal of Philology* 25, no. 4 (2004): 563-601.

[32] Parker, 568.

cultures in general: as long as the woman is intact, she is upholding the honor of the men who support her. This same concept may be extracted from "The Rape of Lucretia," for despite the declaration of her family members that "it is the mind that sins, not the body" and she is therefore not at fault for being violated, Lucretia declares, "though I acquit myself of the sin, I do not absolve myself from punishment; nor in time to come shall ever unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia."[33] As Parker states, "the honor of the family is synonymous with the chastity of its women, who, because of feminine sexual weakness, are in constant danger of becoming whores and adulteresses."[34] Cleopatra was neither tied to a strong male figure in the form of a father, husband, or brother, nor was she perceived as sexually chaste; she was outside the norm and, as such, presented a threat to the Roman social order. With no male to rein her in, the Romans saw that Cleopatra was free to submit to her "feminine sexual weakness," and did so to her own advantage, making major leaders of Rome her bedmates and allies.

Nancy Myers also argues in her article "Cicero's (S)Trumpet" that the image of women in Rome at the time was quite complex and varied depending on the situation: in the *Second Philippic*, Cicero "uses feminine allusions as both strumpet for defamation of the other and trumpet to associate himself with the renewal of the republic."[35] Written in response to Antony's grab for power after Caesar's death, Cicero wrote his *Philippics* in an attempt to argue on behalf of the Republic, and in order to discredit Antony. He thus referenced many of the women in Antony's life, including his mother Julia, his wives Fadia, Antonia, and Fulvia, and his mistress

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[33] Livy *History of Rome* 1.58.

[34] Parker, 569.

[35] Nancy Myers, "Cicero's (S)Trumpet: Roman Women and the Second Philippic," *Rhetoric Review* 22, no. 4 (2003), 339.

Voumnia Cytheris (Antony's meeting with Cleopatra at Tarsus had not yet taken place, or we can be sure Cicero would have made use of the queen as well). Myers argues that "through his use of feminine references in the *Second Philippic*, Cicero systematically undermines Antony's public and private life, weakening his *dignitas* and *auctoritas*."[36] As noted before, family dignity and male authority was directly tied to the honor and chastity of the family's women. The fact that many Romans believed Antony to be a lovesick boy when near Cleopatra only strengthened Cicero's argument that Antony's *dignitas* was damaged by the women in his life. Plutarch's *Life of Antony* summed up much of how the Romans began to view Antony after he began his relationship with Cleopatra:

> For someone of Antony's nature, the love of Cleopatra that befell him was the final ruin that aroused and stirred up many feelings that had been hidden and dormant in him and, if anything good or protective remained, obliterated and destroyed it… Dellius was the messenger Antony sent, and when he saw her face and perceived the power and cunning of her words, he knew at once that Antony could do no harm to such a woman, but rather that she would prevail over him.[37]

Cleopatra was the perfect strumpet of Cicero's rhetoric; she was the ruin of the men with whom she was associated, for she ruled them. Cleopatra, to the Romans, was a blemish on her own family's honor, as well as the honor of Antony. In Rome, such a woman could never hope to compete with an Octavia, who was held up as a selfless and pure woman who would save not only her family, but her entire country.

Cleopatra's image in Rome was not always completely negative. Though most of the Roman writers seem appalled at her behavior for the reasons discussed above, the queen was also an intriguing character to many. Her beauty, charm, and intelligence had been enough to captivate the great Julius Caesar, after all, who, though having a "propensity for affairs," seemed

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[36] Myers, 341.

[37] Plutarch *Antony* 25.

to be particularly intrigued by the queen of Egypt.[38] Suetonius noted Caesar's fascination with the queen in *The Divine Julius Caesar*:

> But most famously he had an affair with Cleopatra, with whom he often extended banquets until dawn. He would have gone with her in her luxury barge through Egypt almost up to Ethiopia, if his army had not refused to follow. Finally, he called her to Rome and only sent her back to Egypt after granting her the highest honors and awards. He also allowed her to name her son after him…"[39]

If Julius Caesar, who would become a god after his death, could be so enthralled by the person of Cleopatra, she must have been something special indeed. Despite Octavian's smear campaign against the queen both before and after her death, he could never quite erase the fact that she had managed to mesmerize two of the most powerful men in the Roman world. Though her image shifted and blurred through the years, this fact would continue to keep her story alive for the next two thousand years.

*Cleopatra Today: The Myth Grows*

Looking back on the perceptions of Cleopatra through time, it is difficult to determine whether or not that old saying "history is written by the victors" is true in her case. Indeed, Octavian and many Romans were keen to play up the image of Cleopatra as a whore and witch, and that perception has persisted through time. Various writers and artists over the centuries have chosen to focus on different aspects of the queen, depending on their personal, cultural, or political tastes and motives; some of these traits are certainly drawn from the Roman perspective, but others seem to emulate from the more romantic elements of her story. In general, Cleopatra seems to have been portrayed in three different yet connected ways in modern times: she can be a lover, a killer, or a powerful queen, depending on the needs of the artist and the audience.

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[38] Cassius Dio *Roman History* 42.34.3.

[39] Suetonius *Caesar* 52.

One painting of Cleopatra which seems to draw on the Roman portrayals of the queen in an attempt to throw light on more modern issues is a painting done by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo in 1743-1744. *Das Bankett der Cleopatra* depicts the infamous banquet Cleopatra held for Antony, during which she purportedly dissolved a pearl in wine or vinegar, thus creating the most expensive feast in history.[40] Though the scene has been recreated numerous times, Tiepolo's rendition is striking because of the anachronistic dress of the queen (see Appendix); she wears what we would view as a very Elizabethan dress, with a high collar, tapered waist, and full skirt. Meanwhile, Antony wears the dress of a Roman general and the background is lined with Greek columns. Cleopatra's servants are also dressed in a style more reminiscent of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries rather than the first century BCE. Was Tiepolo perhaps commenting on the decadence of nobility in his own time by relating them back to Cleopatra and Antony's supposed debauchery? The Roman sources that depicted Cleopatra as a corrupt and decadent ruler would have been well known by Tiepolo's audience, and as such it is not difficult to imagine his underlying meaning for the queen's dress.

Elisabetta Sirani's *Cleopatra* depicts the same scene, but in a much different way (see Appendix).[41] Done in the seventeenth century, Sirani's Cleopatra has the look of a sweet and innocent peasant girl, rather than that of haughty queen; she gazes in the distance with the slightest smile as she holds a pearl earring over a bowl of wine. The pearl-dunking scene became a common pose for many wealthy women who sat for portraits after the Renaissance, so it is possible that Sirani's Cleopatra is, in fact, a representation of a noble woman. All the same,

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[40] Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *Das Bankett der Cleopatra*, 1743-1744, National Gallery of Victoria. For a discussion of the famous account, see Prudence J. Jones, "Cleopatra's Cocktail," *Classical World* 103, no. 2 (2010): 207-220.

[41] Elisabetta Sirani, *Cleopatra*, 17th century, Flint Institute of Arts.

the pose and facial expression of the girl suggests that the artist was not trying to depict her Cleopatra as a haughty and decadent seductress; rather, this Cleopatra is young and modestly dressed with a wistful expression, indicating, perhaps, the artist's wish to portray the queen more as a star-crossed lover, or simply as a woman full of hopes and thoughts.

Most people today associate Cleopatra with sensuality and sexuality, an image which began to take shape even during her own lifetime. Her role as the lover of great men is a prominent one in plays, films, poems and books, but it can also vary from that of a tragic star-crossed lover to a *femme fatale* who destroys men. Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra,* in particular the 1974 Royal Shakespeare Company's production, is especially diverse in its portrayals of the queen; she is by turns frivolous and regal, loving and scheming. In the first act, Enobarbus remarks to Antony that "Cleopatra, catching but the least noise" of his planned departure, "dies instantly; I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer a moment." Antony replies, "She is cunning past man's thought."[42] Thus, from the beginning of Shakespeare's play we begin to see Cleopatra as unafraid to use her role as a woman for her own goals and benefit. Rather than try to wield power like a man, Shakespeare's Cleopatra uses her womanly role to extract promises from the men around her, especially Antony. At the same time, Enobarbus remarks that Cleopatra's "passions are made of nothing but the finest part of pure love."[43] It seems that Shakespeare has no intention of clearing up the historical record insofar as who, exactly, Cleopatra was. This sort of ambiguity is typical of Shakespeare, and it allows those in the audience to make their own choices as to how to perceive Cleopatra. Was she a cunning and manipulative queen, or a woman deeply in love? The 1974 production seems to portray her as a

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[42] William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.2.147-152.

[43] William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.2.153-154.

bit of both; though she loves Antony passionately, she is also willing to use her renowned passions for her own gain. In act 3, Cleopatra declares, "That Herod's head / I'll have; but how, when Antony is gone, / through whom I might command it?"[44] Once again, it is difficult to distinguish between Cleopatra's own schemes and her love and dependence upon Antony. Does she rely on Antony to protect her because he is her lover, or does she use him as a symbol of masculinity with which to rule the eastern Mediterranean?

Early filmmakers lost no time in setting the epic tale of Cleopatra to work in the new medium; in 1899, a French director released a short horror film entitled *Cléopâtre*, and in 1912 her story was put on film in America.[45] In 1917 the famous Theda Bara played the queen in a silent film full of lavish sets and risqué costumes, setting the standard for Cleopatra films for years to come; sadly, no known copies of this film survive, only accounts and still pictures. Nonetheless, Cleopatra has been portrayed in film again and again, for it is a medium which allows all of her decadence, passion, and romance to be played out in detail.

In 1898, George Bernard Shaw wrote the play *Caesar and Cleopatra*, which was adapted to film in 1945 with Vivien Leigh and Claude Rains in the title roles. In stark contrast to Shakespeare, this film is, perhaps, one of the most simplistic depictions of Cleopatra. Making full use of the old Roman prejudices as well as a few new ones, Shaw created a shallow and adolescent Cleopatra who cannot function as a queen until the great Julius Caesar takes her under his wing. Rather than focusing on the famed love affair between the two, Shaw's work centers on the cool-headed and logical nature of Caesar in opposition to the immature and even animalistic Cleopatra; he also chooses to exaggerate their difference in age. Though Caesar was only 53 and Cleopatra was 22 in 47 BCE, jokes abound about Caesar's old age and Cleopatra's

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[44] William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, 3.3.5-7.

[45] *Cléopâtre*, directed by Georges Méliès (1899), and *Cleopatra*, directed by Helen Gardner (1912).

youth. Shaw's Cleopatra is both innocent and beastly; when she unknowingly meets Caesar in the desert, she calls to him to "come up here or the Romans will eat you!"[46] A short time later, she explains to Caesar that her "great-grandmother's great-grandmother was a black kitten of the sacred white cat; and the river Nile made her his seventh wife."[47] This bit of information is used by Caesar again and again, and he often refers to Cleopatra as a kitten; kittens, after all, are cute and fairly harmless, even if they do try to scratch and bite at times. Throughout the film, Caesar guides the naïve girl, but she cannot seem to escape her own nature and emulate Caesar's policy of clemency and clear-headed logic. Instead, she frequently asks Caesar why he does not have people killed, strangled, or beheaded, and even orders her own servant to strangle Pothinus after he insults her. By the end of the film, the viewer is thoroughly convinced that Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra are not true lovers, or even equal political partners; Caesar initiates and develops his relationship with Cleopatra according to his own political motives, and Cleopatra, young and silly as she is, does not have the means or brains to exploit the relationship herself. Though Shaw's Cleopatra deviates from the usual film depiction of the queen as a beautiful and willful siren, his themes would continue to be drawn upon for much of the twentieth century.

Cecil B. DeMille's 1934 *Cleopatra* interprets the queen in several interesting ways; she is not depicted solely as a seductress, but as a woman who is keenly aware of both politics and the power she holds as a woman. From the very beginning, she is shown plotting her way into Caesar's bed and thus his favor; her readiness to roll out of her carpet and onto Caesar's couch immediately paints her as a seductress, unafraid to rely on her sexual prowess. The same is true when she seduces Marc Antony after Caesar's death; her decadent pleasure barge is loaded down with so many dancers, jewels, and slave girls, it's a wonder it can even float. When Antony tries

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[46] *Caesar and Cleopatra*, VHS, directed by Gabriel Pascal (1945).

[47] *Caesar and Cleopatra*, VHS, directed by Gabriel Pascal (1945).

to act unimpressed by it all, she admits to him that she was planning to seduce him because it was her "only chance" to save herself and her country.[48]

DeMille's Cleopatra is complex, for the audience is never quite sure what her motives are; does she want to save her country, as she claims, or does she want companionship and the protection of a lover? More than once her philosopher Apollodorus recommends that she do something "for Egypt," and her response varies depending on the situation. After Caesar is killed on the steps of the Senate, Apollodorus reminds her to think of Egypt; she, distraught over Caesar's death, asks him how she can think of Egypt when her lover is dead. Later, when he tells her to poison Antony to please Octavian and thus free her country from Rome's grasp, she hesitates, but then decides to go through with the plan. The audience is also never quite certain whether or not she truly loves Caesar and Antony; after Caesar's death Apollodorus tells her that Caesar didn't love her, for "it wasn't in his arms he wanted to hold Egypt, but in his treasury."[49] Later, she claims to Antony that she does not miss Caesar for this very reason. When Apollodorus tells her to poison Antony, he urges her to do it because she does not love Antony anyway; she does not disagree, and her willingness to go through with the plan seems to confirm that fact, at least for a time. As Jon Solomon explains in *The Ancient World in Cinema*, "the charming, calculating, yet vulnerable chatter of Claudette Colbert's Cleopatra is as complex as the layered gauze wrapped around a mummy."[50]

Though this Cleopatra seems always to be scheming for the good of her country, she is rarely shown acting as a queen. Mostly the film shows Cleopatra relaxing with Caesar or

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[48] *Cleopatra*, DVD, directed by Cecil B. DeMille (1934).

[49] *Cleopatra*, DVD, directed by Cecil B. DeMille (1934).

[50] Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in Cinema*, (Cranbury, New Jersey: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1978): 42.

Antony, eating, drinking, and enjoying palace life. The only time she is shown working in her throne room is when she is testing poisons, trying to find a painless one to slip to Antony. If Cleopatra is so concerned with the good of her country, why then does she seem to do nothing but lie around with her lovers? It is clear that Cleopatra's image has never been straightforward; the reconciliation of her reported seductive powers and her role as queen of Egypt has always been difficult. DeMille thus chose to focus his film on the reported sensuality and decadence of the queen, rather than on her more mundane political duties.

This film also brings to the surface tensions and conflicts between men and women, particularly women who step out of their traditional roles. In scolding Caesar for his exploits with Cleopatra, Antony remarks that he "hates women out of their place…they can't think and they can't fight. They are just playthings for us."[51] Later, one of his generals scolds Antony for falling into that same trap: "You, who might have been the world's great man, ends all for a woman. For that I give you the world's contempt."[52] Cleopatra herself claims that "Women should be but toys for the great."[53] A female, it seems, could not rule without a man guiding her hand, and knowing that, Cleopatra set about to attach herself to great men.

There is also a great emphasis in this movie on the conflict between East and West. Cleopatra is often referred to as "Egypt," and the hatred the Romans hold for her is apparent. "Who is this poisonous snake that wrecks our men?" is Octavian's cry to the Roman senate.[54] The foreignness of Egypt and the East is apparent, and is emphasized when one Roman girl

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[51] *Cleopatra*, DVD, directed by Cecil B. DeMille (1934).

[52] *Cleopatra*, DVD, directed by Cecil B. DeMille (1934).

[53] *Cleopatra*, DVD, directed by Cecil B. DeMille (1934).

[54] *Cleopatra*, DVD, directed by Cecil B. DeMille (1934).

poses the question, "Is she black?"[55] The query is met with laughs from the other Romans, but it does hint at the way the Romans viewed Egypt and its queen; she is both foreign and exotic, a strange creature and an outsider. This film does manage to effectively demonstrate that distrust and wariness which Rome held for what it saw as the decadent, corrupt, and immoral Orient.

Cleopatra is again reinterpreted in 1963 with Elizabeth Taylor in the role. This film is infamous for its costly production, for once again Cleopatra was equated with decadence and wealth. The lavish sets and costumes often seem to be the centerpiece of the film and something of a distraction from the story. Though perhaps more historically accurate than the DeMille film in some respects (Caesarion is completely left out of the earlier film, for example), the acting is less convincing and the sets are at times ridiculous in their opulence.

The feminist movement of the 1960s was just beginning when this film was released, but ideas about the roles and places of women in society were already changing. The 1963 Cleopatra is thus allowed to be a queen in her own right, and is also defiant when given orders by either Caesar or Antony. Her intelligence is also emphasized in this movie; one of Caesar's generals reads a report of the queen to him that states she is "well-versed in the natural sciences and mathematics. She speaks seven languages proficiently. Were she not a woman one would consider her an intellectual!"[56] This quotation, taken from Plutarch,[57] demonstrates the fact that the filmmakers were beginning to rely more on the ancient sources than on the long-evolving myth surrounding the queen, something that was rarely done in earlier films.

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[55] *Cleopatra*, DVD, directed by Cecil B. DeMille (1934).

[56] *Cleopatra*, VHS, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (1963).

[57] Plutarch *Antony* 27.2-4.

All the same, Elizabeth Taylor's rendition of the role often makes the queen seem like a spoiled child who, though intelligent, is not as adept a leader as the men who surround her. Caesar calls her a child more than once. Taylor herself "offered to redub some of her weaker voice parts" after viewing the finished film for the first time, but by that time the cost of the production had gotten so out of hand that she was denied.[58] To her credit, Taylor was playing a difficult role; this 1963 Cleopatra was a more complex and complete character than many of the earlier versions. All the same, at times this Cleopatra seems crazed or half-mad; when Caesar scoffs at her "obsession" with being divine, Cleopatra nearly flies into a rage, and indeed her "obsession" with being the reincarnation of Isis makes her seem unbalanced at times.[59] This, like Shaw's rendition, plays into the old interpretation of Caesar as a cool and rational thinker, while reminding the audience that Cleopatra was a woman, a fact which could be equated with emotion and zealous religiosity.

Another focus in modern interpretations of Cleopatra has been on her role as a destroyer of men. Lucy Hughes-Hallett traces this trend to the nineteenth century: "after 1825, when Alexander Pushkin revived an ancient but previously neglected story—that Cleopatra would demand a man's life as the price of one night in her bed—she appears repeatedly in the horrific but fascinating guise of the dominatrix, the man-eater, the femme fatale."[60] A painting from 1887 by Alexandre Cabanel demonstrates this sexually-driven but violent aspect of Cleopatra. In his *Cléopatre essayant des poisons sur des condamnés à mort* (see Appendix), Cabanel depicts the queen at leisure, being fanned by a slave girl and gazing into the distance. Beyond her

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[58] Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in Cinema*, 46.

[59] *Cleopatra*, VHS, directed by Joseph L. Makiewicz (1963).

[60] Lucy Hughes-Hallett, *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams and Distortions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 226.

couch, however, is a more terrifying scene: prisoners writhe in pain as they are administered poison, and palace slaves carry the dead bodies out of the courtyard.[61] This painting is also interesting because of its strange mix of East and West; Cleopatra herself displays a very Greek profile, but the palace columns behind her are in the Egyptian lotus style. A leopard rests at the queen's feet, a symbol, perhaps, of both her Eastern identity and her dangerous nature—Cleopatra herself is like a relaxing leopard, watching and waiting for her time to strike. The obsession with Cleopatra's power over life and death became entwined with her sexual symbolism during the nineteenth century, and, as Hughes-Hallett notes, Romantic authors and artists seemed to have been particularly captivated by this side of the queen.

The modern fascination with Cleopatra as a bringer of pain and death did not end with the Romantics; Claudette Colbert's portrayal of the queen also plays upon it, most notably when she begins testing poisons on prisoners in order to find a painless one to slip to Antony. Though this side of the queen began to fall out of favor in Hollywood as the focus shifted to Cleopatra's regal and queenly nature, in 2010 a documentary entitled *Cleopatra: Portrait of a Killer* aired on the BBC. The description for the show states that it "investigates the story of a ruthless queen who would kill her own siblings for power."[62] Based on the discovery of what is believed to be the skeleton of Cleopatra's younger sister Arsinoë, the documentary makes the case that Cleopatra was a cold-blooded murderess, although she was simply playing the political game as every member of her family had done before her. (Remember that her older sister Berenice usurped the throne from their father and was later beheaded by him; when her younger sister Arsinoë and

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[61] Alexandre Cabanel, *Cléopatre essayant des poisons sur des condamnés à mort,* 1887, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerp, Belgium.

[62] *Cleopatra: Portrait of a Killer*, BBC Programmes, 27 Apr 2010, http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00jhv9g.

Ptolemy XIII attempted to take Cleopatra's throne, the example her father had set must have been on her mind.)

In 1999 a film adaptation of *The Memoirs of Cleopatra,* a novel by Margaret George, was first aired on television. This *Cleopatra*, directed by Franc Roddam, uses Leonor Varela, a Chilean actress, for the leading role. Varela is awkward in the first few scenes of the movie, but soon grows into the role; the result is a convincingly complex Cleopatra whom the audience gets to see in the roles of mother, queen, wife, and woman.

Cleopatra as the Queen of Egypt is finally given her due credit in this film. Shortly after meeting her, Caesar tells her that she is "not a queen yet," but the audience watches her develop into one as the movie progresses.[63] She is shown dealing with domestic problems, including drought, famine, and riots, and she deals with them well, earning the respect and love of the Alexandrian people. Such an emphasis on her role as the ruler of Egypt is a departure from previous films, which view her mainly through her relationship with Rome. The depiction of her as a strong ruler goes so far as to even show her fighting, first in the Alexandrian War, and then at Actium, where she rushes into the foray on the deck of her ship shouting, "Fight! Fight for your queen!" to her Egyptian soldiers.[64]

Once again, there is a focus in this film on the differences between East and West, Egypt and Rome. A visit to an Egyptian temple also puts a focus on Cleopatra as situated firmly within Egyptian culture and traditions, and she is shown praying to Isis more than once. When Caesar is spending time with her in Egypt, he once remarks that "Romans hate idleness… erotic

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[63] *Cleopatra*, DVD, directed by Franc Roddam (1999).

[64] *Cleopatra*, DVD, directed by Franc Roddam (1999).

sensuality is a great treason."[65] And, when Cleopatra goes to Rome, the hatred which the Romans feel for her is apparent; they chant "Caesar's whore!" when she is recognized during Caesar's triumph.[66]

Though Varela's Cleopatra is a stronger and more effective leader than the others, she is also shown to have a softer side. She seduces both Caesar and Antony for political reasons in the beginning, but both relationships are full of tenderness and love. Her role as a mother is also emphasized; in the end, she tells Octavian that she will surrender to him if he will allow her son to rule Egypt under Rome. This emphasis on her role as a mother is once again a change from the previous films; the 1934 film left her children out of the picture completely, focusing on her relationship with Antony instead, and the 1963 Cleopatra seemed to care only about her son as the heir of Caesar and herself.

Throughout each of these films Cleopatra is depicted as a beautiful woman who seduces the great men of Rome to secure her own power and position; in each, however, she is depicted in a slightly different way. What, then, is the true picture of Cleopatra? Was she a weak woman who needed to ally herself with men for guidance and protection? Was she a power-hungry seductress? Or was she a queen who sought alliances with Rome for the good of her country, her people, and her children? These and other questions have been posed by historians in recent years, and as such the image of Cleopatra in scholarly works is also changing.

*Cleopatra Today: Creating History*

Using the heavily biased Roman sources, it is difficult at best for historians and classicists to piece together a complete picture of the Egyptian queen. The result in the past has

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[65] *Cleopatra*, DVD, directed by Franc Roddam (1999).

[66] *Cleopatra*, DVD, directed by Franc Roddam (1999).

often been a depiction of the queen as an example of the decadent and corrupt East, in opposition to the order and virtue of Rome. Michael Grant's *Cleopatra*, written in 1972, stands as one of the most complete biographies of the queen, and it was also one of the first major attempts to change Cleopatra's image from one of a wily seductress to an intelligent and politically astute queen.[67] Since then, many historians have taken up the challenge to reveal the queen as more than just "Caesar's whore." Sarah B. Pomeroy, in her *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, examined Cleopatra as a Hellenistic and Macedonian queen in Egypt, and one of the few women able to become a ruler in her own right, rather than through a son or husband:

> The phenomenon of Cleopatra must be set firmly in the context of Ptolemaic queens, shrewd, able, and ambitious. She was not a courtesan, an exotic plaything for Roman generals. Rather, Cleopatra's liaisons with the Romans must be considered to have been, from her viewpoint, legitimate dynastic alliances with promises of the greatest possible success and profit to the queen and to Egypt.[68]

Lucy Hughes-Hallett released an influential work in 1990 entitled *Cleopatra: Histories, Dreams and Distortions*, which examines the queen from her many angles; this is a formidable task, for as Hughes-Hallett notes, "even in her own lifetime she was already, several times over, an invention. Her own propaganda and that of her enemies depicted her in contrasting and equally fictive ways."[69] In the Egyptian and Arabian traditions, Cleopatra was a linguist, a public benefactor, a scholar and even an author: she was thought to have written a work on cosmetics as well as "a work on weights, measures and coinage, one on gynaecology and another on alchemy."[70] Some historians have even begun to argue that the Alexandrians loved her; she

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[67] Michael Grant, *Cleopatra* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972).

[68] Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 124.

[69] Hallett, 14.

[70] Hallett, 73.

threw festivals and erected monuments, and they affectionately called her son "little Caesar." The more information that surfaces on Cleopatra, the more confusing and convoluted her image becomes. How can we reconcile such opposing accounts of the same woman?

Many historians have tried to unearth the "real" Cleopatra by approaching her as a woman, rather than a myth. Lucy Hughes-Halett has noted two prominent versions of Cleopatra the woman: "the selfless dependent wife and the soliciting whore."[71] The middle ground between the two is most likely where Cleopatra would be found. Cleopatra was, after all, a woman, and with that identity came many roles, including lover, wife, and perhaps most importantly, mother. The 1934 and 1963 films, which sought to portray her primarily as a seductress and the lover of great men, dealt minimally with her children; they did not appear at all in the 1934 film, and Caesarion, her first of four, was the only one to appear in 1963. Once again, it is difficult for the modern popular culture to reconcile the beautiful seductress with something as mundane and decidedly unsexy as motherhood, though in the ancient world her fertility and reproductive ability would have signaled the opposite. Cleopatra's love and concern for Caesarion is a major theme in the 1999 *Cleopatra*, but he remains a young boy throughout the film, and his other siblings are once again left out. Though we cannot know for sure how affectionate Cleopatra was as a mother, we do know that Caesarion was important to her. She ordered the carving of a relief on the temple of Hathor at Dendera depicting both her and Caesarion, standing side by side, and when he was only three years old she named him co-ruler to herself. One of her final acts before committing suicide was to send Caesarion, whom she knew Octavian would see as a threat, to India; he got as far as the Red Sea before turning back,

[71] Hallet, 183.

perhaps because of treachery on the part of his tutor.[72] The other three, she knew, were young, unrelated to Caesar, and had relatives in Rome through Antony, and were thus relatively safe. She was right, for though Octavian paraded them through the streets of Rome in gold chains, he then gave them to his older sister to raise as her own. Cleopatra the woman is still something of a mystery and has not been well-examined; it is difficult to extract these more common elements from her larger-than-life story.

Cleopatra the queen is perhaps more easily studied. Her reign in Egypt has begun to catch the attention of not only historians, but the public as well; the 1999 film put a special emphasis on her role as the queen of one of the wealthiest countries in the ancient world. The existence of a powerful female ruler in such a male-dominated world is of interest to many people; how was she able to not only come to power, but remain in power for so long? Sally-Ann Ashton makes note of the fact that "From the New Kingdom principal royal women were often associated with a god in their titulary… thus awarding them some independence from their consort or son."[73] These associations with divinity gave her the right and power to rule Egypt without a male at her side. In general, however, Egyptians and Alexandrians were not opposed to being ruled by a woman, for it was not unheard of in Egypt; Ashton argues that it was "the Romans who seem to have been more disturbed with the idea of a female monarch," or indeed a any kind of monarch, and perhaps many of us still today are confused and disconcerted by such an idea.[74]

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[72] Tyldesley, 198.

[73] Ashton, 61.

[74] Ashton, 72.

Cleopatra's father left her the throne to a country deeply indebted to Rome. On top of that, the first years of her rule were marked by low inundations of the Nile, which in turn meant poor crop yields and famine. She issued two decrees early in her reign, the first to ban the transportation of grain to anywhere but Alexandria, and the second to "exempt country estates from additional 'Crown' taxation."[75] To top her domestic problems, the Alexandrian War was also waged during this time, with Caesar's Roman forces fighting against her brother's army in the very streets of the capital city (Tyldesley notes that "Cleopatra's obvious and growing unpopularity in Alexandria" due to grain shortages gave Ptolemy's advisors an ideal opening to drive her out).[76] By her death, however, Cleopatra was well-loved by the Egyptian people, and her divine cult would survive for another three hundred years. Historians have often focused on the early troubles of her reign, and some have claimed that these problems were proof of her failure as a ruler. Sally-Ann Ashton, in addressing this assumption, quotes Hazzard, who stated that

> The Ptolemaic queens provide no shining examples to feminists if they judge them by their own values, for the emergence of these queens hardly improved the quality of government or bettered the condition of their own sex. And this is particularly true of the last Cleopatra… Ignoring her brother's rights in 51 (to rule), serving her Roman patrons throughout her reign, killing 3 claimants to the throne and extracting large tribute from her people the last Cleopatra emerged greater than her male associates, but with the cruelty equal to any king's.[77]

The very problem with such an interpretation of Cleopatra's reign is that it does take up the modern feminist's viewpoint and standards. The necessity of placing both her person and her reign within its proper historical context is paramount. Cleopatra may have ignored her brother's

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[75] Ashton, 53.

[76] Tyldesley, 48.

[77] R.A. Hazzard, *Imagination of a Monarchy: Studies in Ptolemaic Propaganda* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), quoted in Ashton, 9-10.

right to rule after their father's death, but that is likely because he was ten years old at the time, while she was eighteen; she was clearly the more competent regent of the two. Her killing of other relatives with claims to the throne is nothing to be surprised about, for it was common practice of the time and the culture, for both men and women. She did raise taxes at times during her reign, but it was perhaps in an attempt to pay off her inherited debts to Rome and thus free Egypt from that heavy burden. None of the above claims thus stands as a reason to view Cleopatra as a poor ruler or a poor example of a strong and powerful woman. Though the effectiveness of her rule is still being debated amongst historians, there is a growing consensus among some that Cleopatra was, indeed, a successful queen.

In 1988 Martin Bernal released his controversial work, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization.*[78] Though many of his arguments have been discredited and dismissed, he did manage to spark discussions about race and the relations between African Egypt and European Greece and Rome. Bernal's belief that the Greek language can be traced to Semitic, Indo-European and Egyptian roots is flawed in more ways than one, but he was right in saying that there exist "very profound cultural inhibitions against associating Egypt with Greece."[79] Though the movement to view Cleopatra as a queen rather than a whore has existed for quite some time, it has only been in recent times that her cultural and racial identity has been seriously questioned.

When the Roman girl innocently asks, "Is she black?" in the 1934 *Cleopatra*, she is met with laughter; the implication being that, of course, Cleopatra is not black. Many people have continued to ask this question in modern times, and the response from scholars has been much

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[78] Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1988).

[79] Bernal, *Black Athena*, vol. 1, xiv.

the same until recently. Cleopatra's family was Macedonian; her ancestor Ptolemy I had been put in charge of Egypt by Alexander the Great, and his descendents had ruled there ever since. Because Cleopatra has been traditionally studied by Europeans and European-Americans trained in the Classics, her Egyptian identity is often passed over in favor of her "Greekness," which "can be defined on the basis of her name; that she was of Macedonian ancestry; that her family had imposed itself on Egypt; and that her reported fluency in the Egyptian language did not make her Egyptian."[80] Underlying the issue of skin color, however, is a deeper one of cultural affiliations and "blackness." These questions have come out of larger discussion of how race and cultural identity were construed in the ancient world.[81]

Recently, this subject has been the source of considerable media attention. After the identification of what is believed to be her sister Arsinoë's skeleton in Ephesus, speculation about the race of the sisters has been rampant.[82] The skeleton is said to show traits resembling Europeans, ancient Egyptians, and even black Africans, leading to further questions about Cleopatra's own mixed heritage. Because the identity of her grandmother, as well as other women in the Ptolemaic line, is unknown, she may very well have or not have Egyptian or African ancestry, or both; it is plausible that the Ptolemies would have had wives or consorts from the native population of the land which they ruled. Still, there is resistance to the idea that Cleopatra was black, for it has been ingrained in the literature and in our popular culture that she was Greek and Caucasian, and it was also never used as a source of invective against her by her enemies or critics.

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[80] Ashton, 4.

[81] See Joyce Green MacDonald, "Cleopatra: whiteness and knowledge," in *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts* (Cambridge: University Press, 2001): 21-40.

[82] For example, see "Cleopatra's mother 'was African,'" BBC News, 16 March 2009, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/also_in_the_news/7945333.stm.

Perhaps more important than the color of her skin is the culture with which she identified herself. Sally-Ann Ashton raises this point in *Cleopatra and Egypt*: "It is also important to accept that ethnicity is not only about the degree of color or culture; it is also about choice."[83] Cleopatra was referred to as "the Egyptian" in Roman sources; even in modern films, she often calls herself "Egypt." From all accounts, it seems that Cleopatra did indeed consider herself to be Egyptian first and foremost, not Greek or Macedonian. Tyldesley even goes so far as to make a comparison with the modern British royal family, who are in fact of German ancestry; yet the English do not see them as foreign rulers, and they do not consider themselves German. It seems a mistake, then, to continue to view Cleopatra and her family as solely Greek rulers in Egypt. Though she may or may not have been black, she was most certainly the queen of Egypt, and made a point to identify herself as such.

The other question which has been often in the news of late concerns whether or not Cleopatra was beautiful. Despite the fact that she has always been portrayed by beautiful women in film and popular culture, including such sex symbols as Theda Bara and Elizabeth Taylor, many people have begun to doubt that she really was beautiful. Some of these doubts spring from ancient images of the queen, specifically coins minted by Cleopatra that show her with a masculine profile. Scholars who wish to quell these doubts point to the fact that concepts of beauty change over time and across cultures, and that the Roman sources do describe her as beautiful.

The real question beneath the debates over her beauty, however, is whether or not a beautiful woman can be an intelligent and effective leader. Even today, the perception exists that beauty and intelligence do not coincide, and that women make for weak leaders. Similar perceptions undoubtedly existed in the past; Queen Hatshepsut, after all, is often represented in

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[83] Ashton, 8.

art wearing a beard, the masculine symbol of pharaonic power. Cleopatra was a queen in a world dominated by men; it is possible that she, too, used masculine representations of herself to emphasize her power and her leadership. Nonetheless, her beauty continues to be questioned, for, as Ashton remarks, "it is almost as if it is preferable for Cleopatra not to have been of great beauty."[84] It is as if we feel a need to choose between Cleopatra, the beautiful seductress, and Cleopatra, the intellectual; our culture does not allow for both to exist in one woman.

Cleopatra VII Philopator has been a source of fascination and idolization since her death. After all, as Théophile Gautier wrote in 1845, she is "the most complete woman ever to have existed, the most womanly woman and the most queenly queen, a person to be wondered at, to whom the poets have been able to add nothing, and whom dreamers find always at the end of their dreams."[85] The desperate story of her life captivates our minds, as do her reported sexuality and seductive powers. These popular images of Cleopatra, the woman who seduced the most powerful men in the world and committed suicide rather than be chained and paraded in a Roman triumph, only scratch the surface of her complex and intriguing story, however. The traditional Roman biases against her as a corrupt and immoral witch of the East are gradually being brushed away as more and more historians begin to look at her from fresh perspectives. The public's love affair with her should also not be underestimated, for it can be a powerful force in pushing the academic world to examine her myth more carefully. The extraction of Cleopatra, the woman and the queen, from the various legends that surround her has been a long and difficult process, but one well worth the trouble. After all, the "real" Cleopatra, beneath all of the Roman propaganda and Western superstition, is perhaps an even more intriguing character than the Cleopatra of myth. New questions are being posed about the queen all the time, and the

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[84] Ashton, 12.

[85] Théophile Gautier, quoted in Lucy Hughes-Hallett, 1.

various and different answers to those questions only add to the larger debate over who this woman was and what her importance is to us today.

## Appendix

Giovanni Battista Tiepolo, *Das Bankett der Cleopatra*, 1743-1744, National Gallery of Victoria.

Elisabetta Sirani, *Cleopatra*, 17th century, Flint Institute of Arts.

Alexandre Cabanel, *Cléopatre essayant des poisons sur des condamnés à mort*, 1887, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten.

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